

# The twig songs. 2000

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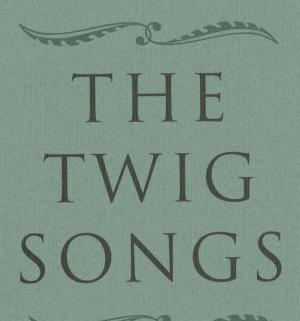
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GWEN EBERT, a native of Wisconsin, has lived for the last several years in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she completed her MFA in poetry. She has worked for many years as a naturalist and environmental educator. She was awarded the first annual Heart Quarterly Poetry Prize in 1999 and the Guy Owen Poetry Prize from Southern Poetry Review in 1996. Her poems have appeared in numerous publications including Passages North, Southern Poetry Review, The Blue Mesa Review and Cream City Review.

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# THE TWIG SONGS

# GWEN EBERT

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PARALLEL PRESS

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These poems first appeared in the following publications: *New Letters*: "Skin"; *Southern Poetry Review*: "Night Recess, Coal Street," "David's Love for Jonathan" and "Early Morning Train Through Indiana." The poem "We Leave You No Unsightly" is inspired by Kenneth Patchen's poem, "We Leave You Pleasure."

Thanks, as always, to my parents and family. I credit Olive and Leone, my grandmother muses, for being present to the poems. I am grateful to Ruth Lasell, Holly Jorgenson, and Richard Tobias for their caring and support. I wish I could share this small success with Fred Koloc, the 'boss' who believed in our lives beyond work. I have benefited from the countless kindnesses of friends and writers in Pittsburgh, Madison, Albuquerque and beyond. This collection was shaped with the sage assistance of Jan Beatty, Jen Lee, Nancy Krygowski, Marilyn Annucci, Barbara Edelman, and Sharon McDermott. Special thanks to Erica Magnus for her artistic insight, enduring wisdom and good humor.

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# For Beth Dillingham and those who work on behalf of the wordless world.

#### INHERITANCE

Mostly I wish I had taken the hand-sewn brown bags she folded into her coat pocket on the cable car to the downtown Gimbels on Tuesdays, and to Winkies on Villard for seam binding, carpet thread last minute notions. When I walk home from the Giant Food Store with the melon and half gallon in slippery blue plastic, the dispensable wrist holes strain into strings that hurt. I lose my grip. I miss the cloth of my people and everything I thought too plain to hold on to.

### WE LEAVE YOU NO UNSIGHTLY

We leave you pleasure in the earth and the primitive noise of lawn crews, cooling systems, freight along a grid. We leave you plots for monstrous houses; no clotheslines. No unsightly. We leave you no open space, no nagging necessity of farms, or work or berries fragrant, close to the earth. We leave you skimpy migrations, dead salamanders, absent slugs and whales, the whole kaboodle of useless and gone. We've ruled it out: the microscopic, majestic, turtle slow growth and decay, the predatory slink of cats. We leave you nothing too subtle for large machinery. No delicate thread of life, we leave you seas upon parched shores, shores upon disregarded waters, refuse, bones of giant trees. We leave you alone with smallness, gadgets, chips, love in different time zones, zip codes. Time – we leave you never enough. We leave you everything we pretend: boundless reserves of water and oil, clipped images of wolves and timbered hills for commercials. Commerce, we leave you expanding violent holes in the cities. Holes in the sky. We leave you holes and a recorded message, music to soothe you while you wait. We make you laugh alone. We leave you cyberspace, a million ways to groom your bodies. We leave you aching for sensation.

## THE QUAVERY LINE

A set of small, v-shaped twigs poking

through snow makes a sentence written against grief. Though, to me, it looks like hieroglyphs. Black mathematics

on white, a winter crop of bird feet.

When read from right to left, it could be a musical score for the pulse of a spider sleeping under bark,

or some unrecognized refrain

like the one I heard in my dream during a bout of bleakness. What a song. It had a rumba beat,

back-up band, chorus drifty as smoke.

The lead was hoarse and off key, but my dream cast didn't care. They sang along. And when I woke up

happy, I thought about V's, the linoleum "v"

made by my grandmother's legs as she sat scribbling song lyrics between them, paper on the kitchen floor, kerchief bent for the radio

while diapers filled, dishes soaked.

I call her sometimes when I need something, but what? and she sings me a 30's tune, says, "You know this one?"

Melodies, little riffs, twig songs in the snow.

At 90, this is what her memory keeps. This is what comes through, even in my sleep. "You know this one?" she sings a quavery line.

No, I say, but keep going.

#### WHAT LOVE DOES

What love does begins in my body. Today, hours after the dance class floor, there is weariness in my arms. My thighs speak strangely all the way up the stairs. You stand in the lamp light with a beauty I will drink all evening, through my irritation, through my complaints, through my insistence that you do the dishes. My body drinks while my mind goes about her Martha duties. It is Mary who walks up to your face, Mary who kisses you several times, tenderly. My body's name, Mary. Physical - the moment, the lamp, the quilt, your skin, the scent of your neck and belly. I don't want to have you out of the old desire for wholeness. I want your presence, your tangle of curls, the amazing movement of your mouth as you speak something and I do not hear.

## NIGHT RECESS, COAL STREET

The School for the Deaf has a long lawn. In the dark, after rain, it smells like lake-water. Deaf children play under yard lights. Sound comforts: muffled hoots and warbles travel great distances from within their bodies. Who needs to understand? Gestures conduct the orchestra of air.

Tonight, the air is full of towns and lakes and things I seldom say, or speak: for instance, whom I love. Through wrought iron fence kids on a court are a silent film. The ball itself seems to bounce without sound.

These nights go against the rules. Sensations murmur in the palm, on the skin, in the sway of heavy branches. Dazzle of car lights, slickness of tire, I am spying on a recess, an absence of syllable.

I imagine words I could live without. Say, "lesbian," or "husband." Watch language stake its stupid claims. Off the bus, where I walk by the School for the Deaf, there is nothing for me to understand. The night is itself—textures in wind, a wild enthusiasm of arms.

#### DAVID'S LOVE FOR JONATHAN

I was the stone embedded in Goliath's forehead. I was the Centurion's gorgeous boot. I was the scent of the whore's hair draped on Iesus' feet. I was Aaron's budding staff. I was the tar and bulrush basket, Bathsheba's towel, Delilah's shears, the jawbone of an ass. I was Samson's pillars pulling down. I was Abed-nego's furnace, the pit of lions. The pile of pot shards, Job's boils, King Saul's cut robe in the cave, David's lonely psaltery by night. I was the stench in the ark, the branch that hung Absalom, the brimstone begging Lot's wife to look back. I was Hagar's belly and Sarah's laugh at God, Mount Horeb trembling with the Law. I was the rock Moses struck in a rage, the murmuring over manna, the earring melted to make the calf. I was the bullock waiting to burn for Baal. I was the raven who fed Elisha, the goat snagged to stay the knife from Isaac, the burro who spoke to Balaam. I was a sheaf of Joseph's dreamy grain, the pit his brothers threw him in. I was the bottomless vial of oil, the visions in the scroll. I was David's love for Ionathan. I was the wall of parted water beginning to fall. I was Esau the hairy son, smelling of game, losing the birthright. I was honey and locust. The beam in the eye. The head on the platter, the handwriting on the wall. I was the scourge, the tables turned, the withered fig tree, the eve salve of spit and mud. The man who saw people like trees, the woman who touched the robe without asking. The hoard of demons sent out into swine, the herd rushing off the cliff, healed lepers who never came back, road to Emmaus, kiss in the garden, crown of thorns, scar in the side, tongues of flame, water to wine, ghost on the sea, seven stars and seven lamps of gold.

#### THE LITTLE BAT TRAINER

wakes at odd hours, wearing his old baggies, head in a muffle.

He brings his glowing jar, the weighted socks. Sprigs of soaked grass in his shoes. The world is turning over. Night side leaves a cool breath.

This he loves: barely the light and limbs bare, color of no color. Fog dampened hair.

If the bats return all swung-down, half-winged, singing the music that no one hears,

then by stars he will toss them the sock weight. As they drop to dive for him in their blindness,

no one imagines the faces of mice he knows are angels.

#### EARLY MORNING TRAIN THROUGH INDIANA

I doubt they were strangers, sharing the train seat and passing talk back and forth like homemade cookies. I think the man in the striped tee and fatigues was Mennonite, the giant with the blond bowl-cut was Amish – blue sleeves rolled up. Both wore black boots spattered with manure. I heard their words as I dozed in the darkened car: eggplant, turnips, harvest, per bushel. I don't know where they had been, or why they had traveled in work clothes from Philadelphia to Chicago. I don't know who loved a long-skirted woman, or what was permissible, or if either would give up their home acres, or if they ever wanted to. I don't know what they dreamed.

I do know that when they spoke I heard an innocence: *Here we go*, when the train started up; *chigachigachiga*, at the stop in Ohio; *Let's go swimming*, when we reached the harbor. I do know that the sun came up, that the landscape was ugly, that they studied it through the window for its use and for abandoned machines. I do know that work had made them beautiful – their faces and chests – and all night across the aisle I wanted the Amish one's arms, as he cradled his head, as he draped them across his woolen thigh.

#### SKIN

On mountain slopes the sun hallucinates on some blue flower. My skin, the fox, sleeps in the open innocence of light.

Years later, I harvest the damage in my face. Chemo-cream rakes mud around the lips, scalds the crow-feet, cuts fire trenches down from the nose. Pardon the faint hawks burned in the forehead, the old rip of skin like summer earth.

My dear endangered atmosphere, you leave the century stripped and bewildered. Did we mean for this bright cruelty? Did we think of frogs on jungle stems, peepers in mucky reeds across the North? Scientists in dripping waders count amphibians. Count again. From every backwater they disappear.

Some trick of ultraviolet light now enters the glistening pervious skin.

Useless egg strands float as noodles in a broth. Black heart, black heart I am sorry.

When I was six I dropped the jar of pond water; a tadpole squirmed in splintered glass. So much lost at once: doubling cells, bloom of the tail, the small mouth feeding in fine green hair.

Budding legs and finger webs, the water body comes to air, to the slick sexual back and eyes. Jewels on brackish waters. I am writing this for our skin—
close as it gets—
our delicate membrane,
our thin guardian of the slippery unknown.
There's no hard evidence against this reckless age.
No holes in the sky to point to.
Just a mottling
above the left brow,
a murky and permanent absence
in the earth's watering eye.

#### OF YOU I

Dreamed of you I always had a love for and an appetite-

soul food you

We don't in twenty years but last night dreaming your face came close

words
then breath
our lips
surprised by
what to do
taken by
our warm
old
obvious

## ALBUQUERQUE, CHRISTMAS EVE

Yellow light through the paper luminario. Yellow candles in our pockets. In a yellow sheen robe, Brian the dark-eved priest, remains his Buddhist self canting Episcopal prayers in the brave lonely space above our heads. Pagan poet Tim sits next to me by accident. Our shoulders are old friends bumping on the downbeat of Angels We Have Heard. Angels, as I remember are blue and earthen brown. My relief is particular as stars in their black bowl. The mountains here still sleep like dogs – circle and rest, find a good dry spot under the windowsill of the world. Brian says, Who could really follow a star?

How many animal sheds were there in Bethlehem? Don't you think God was hard to find?

I used to hate this desert town. Thought it my exile from something called home. Colored it with every kind of sadness. Now, it is simply yellow. Some red, some brown. Green in the mountains. Scrub green stippling the foothills. Phyllis, in her green uniform, keeps the trails I used to walk. In La Cienega she was stalked by a cougar. Tells me it was high in the rocks and growled down. Illusive, but still around. We agree a good sign. Everything seems a sign: the three extinct volcanoes and the broken channels of the Rio Grande, the low-crouching barber and pawn shops on Fourth Street. In a backwards way

I'm always learning to love what's here, to belong for good to an innocent ground. Tonight, I won't need a star to follow, but I'll take the map that Phyllis made of a trail I could walk in my sleep: Mud Spring to the ridge, down Paradise Canyon.

#### LOIN

Beautiful old biblical word for the groan between my hips, the lonely lapping on shores. Of the loins, a child, a fruit, a bringing forth, a sweet kind of crying. Loin. Contain the silent range of mountains, snow melt at flood stage, scent through willows, rush of uncontrolled and downward. Loin. The slope, the horizon giving way. Loin. The depth between stars, blue-black, maroon, that sound in the word - an elk call in the haze of frost. Life calling life. Ancestry backward, loin to loin. Pain of childbirth. Pain of no birth, loin. The cloth over hair and animal bell. The ringing. The monastery. Raw, rain blackened trees of the loin, loin.

#### MONTANA MEADOW LARK

What's this scrap of sense in the memory, this bird song?
My grandmother Olive stands in black and white prairie grass, thin once, her arms contented.
Plain skirt, plain blouse.
A smile with a loose fit.
Water running in the draw.
She could have stayed.
Montana cowboys wanted her at home – good cook from Milwaukee, good farmer's stock.

My mother, 19 in Glacier Park, hikes from her wait shift in the lodge. Feet ache. She still takes a trail with a waterfall to herself. She forgets a woman's clamoring to try harder, to be enough. Wind blows it off in all directions.

Ten years later
we come along to see big horn sheep
from the station wagon.
Later we're stuck in the gumbo road to Haver.
We meet a cousin once removed,
a brown skinned stranger
named after Grandma.
She takes us
to the cool-house in the hill.
Olive. Miles of it.
Snake tracks in sand.
She paints oil color buttes
and prong horns.

Cooks three meals a day for a table full of men without words. I remember this: eggs and steak and pancakes every morning.

When mom was young she took a summer trip to the ranch. Her mother had her change of life there on the train and bled in a torrent to Helena. Tore her skirts into clot rags. And those other story details: an uncle whose heart stopped, forking hay, and my mother – breakneck over forty miles of dirt with his body on the back seat.

Facts that stick like cheat grass in my socks. I'm along some road in Idaho, picking sage, letting the wind bring up a sweet nothingness. Feels familiar. Feels empty. Feels the way we taught each other where to go for a fix of magpies and strong light.

#### LISTENING TO THE NEOLITH

Kate ignores the Irish ruins, rubble and castle, potato famine farm.

A hundred years is nothing. A thousand years is young.

She scuffs at the dirt and picks the field for turned up flint tools, scraper stones.

Feel where the thumb wore a groove. She handles the yellow neolith

where the chipped edge cut the head from the fish, and the drumbeat worked the air around the fire.

She feels it in her palm – a time, she says, when women were more than ghosts,

and prayed to someone like themselves, and left behind these passage graves,

these hut rings in the grass above the cliff, where Kate lies down, where Kate lets her body learn.

#### DAY OF GRACIOUS

Now is a green and black day of gracious rain.

The night of it left windows down on the pale blue Pontiac.

Ponds pooled in the foot wells.

Beaded water broke and ran down webs of sleep. Flashes and distant tombs, quart jugs, breakers, coal tumbling dreams.

Now the light comes full of sound.

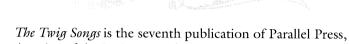
Birds courting in the rain call cross warble from roof pitch

to alley shrub. Leaves

unravel as newborns

in the thrumming, as toddling hands in the spout. The worked world is sodden while oblivion labors.

And you sleep on
in a green and black time,
because rain loves your body
more than your mind,
because it hushes the hundred yard blowers,
mowers, motors of the heart.



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